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THE RIGHT TO BE WRONG AND THE RIGHT TO BE RIGHT.

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INDIAN EDUCATION HAS BEEN CONTROLLED FOR THE MOST PART BY THE OFFICIALS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND THE BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS. THERE IS NOW A NEW TYPE OF SCHOOL FOR INDIAN YOUNGSTERS WHICH RETURNS THE ELEMENT OF LOCAL CONTROL TO ADULT INDIANS. THIS DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL IS LOCATED AT ROUGH ROCK, ARIZONA, AND EXHIBITS TWO UNIQUE EXPERIMENTAL ELEMENTS, LOCAL CONTROL AND CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION. THE LOCAL BOARD MEMBERS AT ROUGH ROCK HAVE DEVELOPED THREE POLICIES WHICH MAKE THEIR SCHOOL DIFFERENT-- (1) THE BOARDING SCHOOL CHILDREN ARE PERMITTED TO GO HOME EACH WEEKEND, (2) THE DORMITORIES ARE MANAGED BY NAVAHO ADULTS WHO ARE NOT PROFESSIONALS, AND (3) SALARIES OF NON-CERTIFIED PERSONNEL WERE REDUCED, MAKING POSSIBLE THE HIRING OF NAVAHOS WHO WERE UNABLE TO FIND EMPLOYMENT ELSEWHERE. THIS SPEECH WAS PRESENTED AT THE EIGHTH ANNUAL INDIAN EDUCATION CONFERENCE, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, TEMPE, MARCH, 1967. IT ALSO APPEARS IN THE "JOURNAL OF AMERICAN INDIAN EDUCATION," VOL. 7, NO. 2, JANUARY, 1968, PP. 1-6, (ES)

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The Right to be Wrong and the Right to be Right

Robert A. Roessel Jr.

Highlights and excerpts from the Eighth Annual Indian Education Conference speech, Arizona State University, March, 1967.

"THE RIGHT to be wrong and the right to be right" are essential American prerogatives—privileges of democracy. This freedom that comes with the right to be wrong or right gives our country its eminence. We have an opportunity to vote for the people we wish as leaders in government and you may disagree with our choice, but we have this chance and right, and this is the meaning of freedom.

Yet I believe that this has not been a privilege that the Indians have enjoyed for very many years. The Indians have not been given the right to be wrong, but have been subjected to people of expertise who have made decisions for them.

Personally I believe that the right to be wrong was granted the Indians in a large measure through the War on Poverty. The Office of Economic Opportunity, under Sargent Shriver's leadership, gave the Indians their first chance in an important, comprehensive way. Throughout this country today is an Indian Community Action Program which shows that the Indians are now responding: they have the ability, the skills, and the programs that make us proud. Those of us living in urban areas, where we used to think all opportunities lay, hang our heads in shame. Therefore, we should not underestimate the impact of the War on Poverty.

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These remarks are directed more to the area of Indian education, suggesting that in the field of education we may be losing the right to be wrong—that you and I, as American people, may be taking the back seat and allowing education to slip through our hands and into the hands of the experts and professionals. I consider myself a professional educationist and am proud of it, yet I feel that the people in the back of the room there, the people on my school board who are un-

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educated by the standards you might use in comparing them with me, have intelligence far exceeding what I have. So, I am saying if the American dream is the dream of the right to be wrong and the involvement of all people, if democracy means you and me, then however humble our role may be we have a choice in this great country.

Of course, I believe that the right to be wrong has significance in education, in Indian Education, and specifically at Rough Rock. We can learn things whose importance extends far beyond the few people who live in that community. Maybe we ought to give education back to the Indians; this is what has happened at Rough Rock with much success.

On the Navaho Reservation, as on every reservation where there are schools, there are Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, which in Navaho is called a "Washington Beolta" (Washington school). Public schools, which are attended by 95 per cent of the Navahos, are called "Belagona Beolta" (the white man's school). Up until eight months ago these and the mission schools were the only kinds which Indians attended.

There is now a new type of school which I think has real significance, "Dineh Beolta" (The People's school, the Navaho school, the Indian school). This little school is located at the foot of Black Mountain in an isolated community, 16 miles from the nearest pavement, where the average education for the adults is one year. What we learn at Rough Rock has implications for ASU and every reservation, every town and community you represent.

Two elements make this experiment unique. The chain binding us together is cooperation: the BIA, Navaho Tribe, University and the community have united. First of the two distinguishing features of the Rough Rock School is *local control*. The second is *cultural identification*.

In this community, on almost any day, you will find nearly 100 parents visiting the school to see what's happening: visiting the classrooms, taking part in school programs, working in the dormitories, eating in the cafeteria, really participating in the school. I ask you how many schools in the country permit these kinds of visits from parents? When my children were attending the lab school here at ASU, my presence was required for two purposes only: one to take my children to school or to pick them up, and once a year to confer with the teacher about them. Here at Rough Rock, you have people, who are not supposed to know the meaning of education, coming in on horseback, wagons, and trucks, day after day, because they do care and they are concerned.

We have a school board of five members. The president of the board is also a tribal councilman, Teddy McCurtain, who's educated in the formal sense; the other four are not. I have worked for people whom you and I would consider highly educated, yet I've never worked for people with more insight or for whom I had greater respect than these five people, who by many standards are "uneducated."

Once a week, all day, the board members meet and talk about their school--these people who're not supposed to care. You don't hear them say, "Let the superintendent do it, he's being paid, let him do that." What do these unpaid, non-professionals do? They encourage people to come to school, or get the roads ready when we have visitors, and things like that.

Let me mention several policies they developed to give you an idea of how well they're doing; if we listened to the experts we would not be doing these things. On the Navaho Reservation, most boarding schools do not allow children to go home every weekend. One of the first actions the board took—not without a lot of discussion and hand-wringing on my part—was to say that children could go home—not only every weekend, but any time the parents wanted them to. *The first policy developed was that the child belongs to the family and parents, and not to the schools.* Don't think that's an easy thing for professionals to accept because we believed that, "We had to have them. We can't let them do that. They'll speak Navaho at home. We can't possibly teach them if we let them go home every weekend. They come back with nits. Oh my, you just can't do that." Well, the Rough Rock school board is doing just that and instead of losing students, we're gaining them. Parents who had never had a child in school before said, "All right, now that you've shown me that the children belong to us and we can have them when we want them, I'll put them in school. I've never put them in school before because it was always like you were taking the children away from us—we had no voice."

Another policy the school board developed is dormitory parents. I'm not a strong believer in dormitories, yet we're running one. Our school board said, "We can't operate as a day school because of the roads, distance, winter, etc., but let's try to bring the family and parents into the school." So it's a boarding school—and we have the "dorm parents" program. This means we have Navahos without education—not instructional aides with 12 years of school and three hours of guidance—but parents who herd sheep. They come into the dormitory and spend five weeks with the girls and boys, sleeping with and talking to the children, helping them, just as parents do. I think the connotations of this policy can help Indian education.

To begin with, the dormitory was operated by an excellent group of professional people who had taken all the courses in psychology,

education and dormitory management, but the dormitory was cold as an institution. Our school board queried, "Is this what we want?" and gave an emphatic "No!" to hiring more professionals.

Instead they hired five Navahos who had never operated a dormitory, had a total of only six months' experience in dormitory operations (almost every Navaho has lived in a dormitory at one time), and who have developed one of the most exciting dormitories in the world because it has the difference of possessing warmth and love. The reason was not because the professionals told them how to do it, but because the Indians told the professionals what they wanted.

The third item the school board did, because they were controlling the school, was to cut salaries. Rules in many reservation schools require a person to have a high school education to sweep the floors. Our school board said, "Let's cut that salary to $1.50 an hour and hire more people: let's try to hire people who couldn't get jobs otherwise." So about 60 percent of our workers are Navahos who could not get jobs elsewhere. We have an in-service training program which allows these people to learn some English as they work. It's been a tremendous success. Those who can get $4.50-per-hour jobs are encouraged, but the ones who cannot are the ones we are concerned with now.

Curriculum is an area supposed to be pretty much for the experts. When I went to Rough Rock I had my own ideas on what should be taught. One of them, of course, was Navaho culture. Last November, the board sat down with me and said, "We think that the program that we developed here is good, but you're not doing enough in this area." And for about four hours, some of the very people now present talked about what they wanted the finished product to be, what they wanted out of education, what they wanted their children to learn, what they wanted their children to be, how they thought the school could teach this. And out of that discussion grew an entirely different curriculum program.

If time permitted, I could mention several areas in which the school board and the experts disagreed. One significant thing was the hiring of the opposition. Some of the board members haven't heard me say these things before so I hope I have a job when I return. I became concerned about the fact that when someone criticized the school, the board wanted to hire them at the school. We have some temporary jobs, like the dorm parents. One lady, Bah Tsinajinnie, came up one afternoon and really got mad at the school board—just cussed them out. It disrupted our meeting while she really laid them low. The next thing I knew they had her working at the dormitory. I asked, "What's wrong with these people? We're starting something new and we need people who want to support us—*what* are they trying to do?" B.T. is

now one of our strongest supporters. She's become a part of this school and now, instead of criticizing, she is standing on the rooftop praising the school and its accomplishments.

I could mention other examples like this. In the area of local participation and local control, the Rough Rock Demonstration School is proving that it can accept the right to be wrong, which will in fact be the right to be right.

The second area in which the board is blazing trails is in the sphere of cultural identification. This is what we call the "both-and" approach to Indian Education—taking the best of the dominant culture and the best of the Indian culture and putting these together in the classroom so the child grows up with a positive sense of well-being, a positive self-image, with pride in his heritage. Nobody is against this, or very few people at least, and yet you can search high and low in schools and not find a continuous program from the first grade through high school and into college which is attempting to do this. This is what we're trying to do for our white children, to make them proud they're Americans, proud of their German ancestry or their Scotch lineage. We do this deliberately and successfully in our textbooks, but not for Indians. So our board said that they wanted the Indian people to be included in a positive way in our curriculum, and gave an outline of what they wished; not just generalities, they wanted biographies and history. They wanted to learn about the Navahos today, their problems and opportunities. They want the Navaho child to be proud of being a Navaho as well as being proud of being American. They wanted the Navaho language taught in the classrooms.

If I told you all the things that were taking place, you would, perhaps, scratch your head. For instance, we have a mental health program. If you know Navaho culture well enough, you know what I'm talking about, and if you don't, we'll let sleeping dogs lie. In the area of culture identification we had a situation where the Indian people, through their own desires, efforts and ideas, said we ought to teach our modern Indians, through this school, to have pride in themselves.

We had 4,000 visitors up to the end of February. Of this group, nearly three-fourths have been Indians; and of the Indian group, approximately 50 tribes have been represented. And what are the two areas that they're interested in? The very two areas we consider to be the guts of the school, that's what they're interested in. "Is it true that you can control your school? We don't believe it." We let them sit in on the school board meeting, and hear the board tell me what to do and make real decisions, not just superficial ones. They say, "Is it true that you're really teaching respect for Indian culture?" We say, "Go into the classrooms." So these are the two areas that Indian people almost universally support and come to visit and see.

What does the Rough Rock community think about the school? We interviewed one-third of the community and asked them, "What do you think is the difference between the Rough Rock school and all other schools: the BIA, the mission schools, the public schools?" We didn't know what they were going to answer, but they said exactly the same two things that we did about the foundation of the school. In their own words, "It teaches both ways." And the second answer was "Local control." We asked, "Who is on the school board? Can you name them?" And every single person named everyone on the board. (Can you name *your* school board members?) We can't fool all the people all the time, so we asked, "Who do you think controls — the administration or the school board?" The interviewees answered, "The school board." Again we asked, "Have you ever visited the classrooms?" Everyone questioned said he had.

What do outsiders say about the school? Dr. Joseph Colman, deputy assistant secretary of education, Health, Education and Welfare, stated, "Rough Rock is leading the way for American education." Sargent Shriver said, "You, Rough Rock, have found the answer that New York City is desperately seeking in how to involve parents and how to create pride in oneself." Will Rogers Jr. stated that "Rough Rock is one of two schools that I know I would want my children to attend." Herb Striner, director of program development, Upjohn Institute, Washington, D.C., and an economic advisor to three presidents, visited the school and talked to the people who speak no English; then said: "Give the American people time to learn from you; give us time."

So I'm suggesting that the lesson we can learn from Rough Rock is one that American people have accepted and expounded over the years: the right to be wrong. I'm suggesting that we must be careful that in education we do not lose that right. And I'm suggesting that at Rough Rock, with all these kinds of people involved in education, that all of us, no matter what our education backgrounds, can profit.

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